

CHRISTMAS, AND HOW IT WAS KEPT.

"CHRISTMAS comes but Once a Year," sings Wither, to the relief of needy housekeepers and improvident gentlemen in arrear with their tradespeople; and to the regret of happy homes, with their genial family gatherings and joyous children home for the holidays. Easter and Whitsuntide cannot compete with Christmas in merriment, the old games and feasts on those days are gone out of fashion, and we always give a thought of pity to our friends in Australia and New Zealand who assemble on December 25th round a board spread under a hot summer sun, and provided with unnatural-looking green peas. But in the old country and in the colony the staple dish is that famous plum-pudding which Dawson Turner compared to the form of the world, and which no foreign "artiste" can copy, as we know by experience and history. The French king, wishing to regale the English ambassador with similar fare, enjoined his *maitre de cuisine* to be particular in its preparation. The ingredients were properly weighed, the copper was of due size, the water was exact in quantity, the boiling was timed to a minute, and the pudding appeared as a triumph of French art. One addition only had been forgotten—the cloth; and so, to the amazement of the Englishmen, the unfortunate pudding was served confidently out in huge tureens with the utmost gravity by the good-natured monarch. A Frenchman, however, might plead that so late as 1801, "At the chaplains' table at St. James's, the first dish served and eaten was a tureen full of luscious plum-porridge."

Taking our plum-pudding, with its various condiments, for our model, we shall in the following pages do our best to show Christmas under all its forms, and with all its concomitants, past and present, legends, customs, folk-lore, merriment, and memories.

In Denmark the folks practised an ugly glamour on Christmas-eve, while sitting at table, when they wished to know who among them would die before the next Christmas. Some one would go out quickly and peep in at the window, and whoever was seen at table without a head would die in the coming year. At Anspach the superstition was held that when the Christmas-tree was lighted, any one had but to look at the shadows of those present to learn who would die during the next year, for their shadows would be headless.

Shakspeare, in "Hamlet," introduces *Marcellus*

relating a popular superstition of the period in a beautiful strain of poetry :

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long.

And then they say no spirit stirs abroad—
The nights are wholesome—then no planet strikes,
No fairy takes, no witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.

In Suabia the arch-fiend is supposed to be affable and generous at this time, and if met at a cross-road at midnight will make presents to those who ask him. On Christmas-day, at sermon-time, witches may be discovered through a hole bored in a spoon made of lath; but the witch-seer must keep a milk-pail on his head, and turn his back on the preacher. But if he escape the indignation of the priest and the marguilliers, he must reach home before the bells have done ringing, or he will be dismembered by the witches.

The Christmas log was supposed to ward off pestilence, during the coming years, from all persons who had sat round it.

At Commercy, in Lorraine, at six o'clock on Christmas-eve, a huge log, called *souche de Noël*, was kindled; at Bonneval the largest piece of timber which could be found was set on the fire, as it was intended to last out three days, whence its name of *tréfoué* (*trois feux*). Children were not allowed at Commercy to sit in the chimney-corner, because they intercepted the draught.

In France the block was taken off the fire when half burned and kept till the following year to light the new yule log, and the charred wood was preserved as an amulet against fire in England. Barnaby Goodge tells us of a curious superstition that water became wine at the moment of the Saviour's Nativity, and then turned into water again.

The Breton peasants believe that oxen and asses have "the gift of speech every Christmas-eve, in recompense for their ancestors having been present at the nativity," as one of their popular writers quaintly puts it. In the western parts of Devonshire there is an old tradition that the ox and the ass kneel down in the fields at midnight, on Christmas-eve; and in Lancashire there is a similar superstition, with a supplementary one, that the bees may be heard humming the Old Hundredth Psalm, in adoration of our Saviour's birth. There is a story told by a North American traveller, that he observed among the woods an Indian stealthily creeping towards a spring, in order, as he said, to see the chief stag of a herd of deer kneel down to welcome the dawn of Christmas-day. In Herefordshire, to this day, however, on Christmas morning, all the cattle are fed with hay instead of straw, and all the household servants are given white in lieu of brown bread.

In Suabia the girls, at Christmas, divine the trades of their future husbands by the shapes which molten lead dropped into water takes, and predict the one who shall first be a bride, by standing in a ring round a blindfolded goose; the fortunate one whom the bird approaches will first put on the marriage-ring.

There is a pretty custom preserved at the

Foundling Hospital at Lyons: the first child abandoned at its gates on Christmas-eve is received with peculiar honours—laid in a handsome cradle and covered with the softest clothes.

In France there is another custom of children, that of the *bonhomme Noël*: fathers who are pleased with their good little boys and girls, fill with toys a shoe which is placed over night in the chimney-corner; the next morning these treasures form a premium on early rising. In France these gifts are pedantically called *étrennes*, a corruption of *strenæ*, and in Spanish *aguilando*, implying the donor's wish that the recipient may live as long as an eagle—a thousand years!

In the north of Germany parents on Christmas-day lay out presents for their children in the great parlour, and the mother apart with the daughters, and the father with the sons, reminds them of what has been commendable, and what has been faulty in their conduct during the past year. In the little villages these presents are distributed by a deputy known as Knecht Rupert (servant Rupert), who appears dressed in a white robe, a mask, high buskins, and a flowing flaxen wig. He is received with great solemnity, inquires into the characters of the children, and then proceeds to deliver toys to the deserving and a rod for the naughty, in the character of a supernatural messenger. The Suabian *Pelzmärkte* wears a dress of twisted pea-straw and a fur cap; his face is black with soot, and a basket fills one hand and a stick the other; he is known also as *Schante Klas* (St. Nicholas), and rewards the good and punishes bad children as he takes his goblin-walk on Christmas-eve. In Pennsylvania, on Christmas-eve, the children hang up a stocking at the foot of their beds, in order to receive presents from a fabulous night visitant called *Krish Kinkle* (*i. e.* *Kindlein Infant-Christ*), who deposits in it sugar-plums if its owner is good; but if the child is naughty, then *Pelsnichol* (St. Nicholas with the fur-cap) leaves behind a significant birch-rod.

In Devonshire, on Christmas-eve, the farmers wassail the apple-trees in the orchard with the toast and heel-taps of a bowl of cider, wishing the trees all health in the coming year—a custom as old as the time of Herrick. In Tübingen an alarm-bell is rung, to drive the demons away while the farmers feed the cattle and bind the fruit-trees with straw to secure their fertility. In Thuringia the trees are awoken with the song,

Little tree, wake up!
Frau Holle is at hand.

In Norway, offerings of little cakes are made, through holes picked in the ice, to the Spirit of the Waters. In some places, Fosbroke informs us, ships sailed without their foremast, in honour of the season, which in those days, however, we must remember, was so gentle, that halycons brooded on the sea! Bread baked on Christmas-eve was supposed never to become mouldy.

We are afraid that the last relics of Christmas jollities, so charmingly portrayed by Sir Walter Scott, are rapidly disappearing: the morris-dancers fantastically decked out with ribbons and antiquated dresses, redoubtable George and the Dragon, the hobby-horse, the wooden swords, and

the stupid "old man" of the party, the savage conflict, the death-struggles of the vanquished, and the final restoration to happiness of the combatants by old Father Christmas. Where are Friar Tuck, Maid Marian, the Fool, Scarlet, Stokesley, Tom the Piper, and brave Little John? Where are the merry men of Lincoln, who delighted "the Rt. Hon. Sir J. Banks, Pres. R.S.," at Revesby; the fool and his five sons, Pickle-Herring, Blue Breeches, Pepper Breeches, Ginger Breeches, and John Allspice, and the one fair woman, "Cicely," with a "fiddler, or master music man." In Hampshire the mummers (*i. e.* disguisers or maskers) are almost extinct. At Sunderland the pitmen went about, as the sword dancers, in white shirts and trousers embroidered with ribbons; the captain, or "cauf's tail," wore a faded uniform and a formidable cocked hat and feathers; the fiddler, a huge clown, walked in woman's attire; while the more modest plough-driver, or fool, carried a blown bladder at the end of a stick, wore a hairy cap with a fox's brush, and rejoicing in the name of Bessy, executed the important function of treasurer. In Northumberland, the fool or *stot* plough was used by the performers to draw long furrows before silly churls who neglected to pay them for their gambols. These customs, we believe, are not yet obsolete. On Christmas-eve, at Ramsgate and in the Isle of Thanet, the young men, grotesquely habited, come "a hodenig," *i. e.*, carrying a dead horse's head upon a pole four feet long, and snapping the jaws of the hoden or horse together by pulling a string, while their mates ring handbells and sing carols. The "goosey (*i. e.* disguised) dancers" still gambol, and sing, and beg for presents in Cornwall, and the old women go "a-gooding" by asking for a measure of meal to make their pudding. On Christmas-eve the toast of the "mock," or log on the fire, is drunk with all the honours, and the lads of the village perform the story of St. George, one of the old miracle plays, in the largest room in the inn, and sing hymns on Christmas morning. It is at least a more seemly proceeding than the mediæval procession of the asses in Rouen cathedral. It is curious to observe that in the beginning of the present century St. George gave place to George III. in a cocked hat, and waving a broad sword, while the dragon was supplanted by Napoleon, into whose eyes the fool blew flour, and rapped the mock emperor's shoulder with the bladder attached to his stick.

In 1348, visors, buckram, and whimsical dresses were provided for the court masquerades at Christmas. In the reign of Henry IV. twelve aldermen and their sons rode a mumming to Eltham Palace, and "had great thanks;" but Henry VIII. threatened all masquers with three months' imprisonment as common vagabonds. Masques were held at court in the reign of James I., from which the noble actors reeled home to bed; and "Calisto," represented in 1674, before Charles II., at a lavish cost, lasted from December 8th to January 22nd. In the reign of George III., as Pope reminds us, the groom-porter had the privilege of setting out tables for play in Christmas week at Kensington Palace. But before this time grave colleges had their lords of misrule. Trinity

College, Oxford, provided for its Christmas prince, and Merton and St. John's elected their several "kings of beans." In the buttery of St. John's there is still preserved an ancient candle-socket of stone, formerly used to burn the Christmas candle in, during supper, at the high table, on the twelve nights of the festival. Grim law itself relaxed into a smile. In 1635 the revel-master appointed by the inns of court borrowed the king's poleaxes, was preached to by chaplains, had all the mock-parade and privileges and jurisdiction conceivable, and on resigning his office found that he had spent 2000*l.* of his own proper means on the folly; but the king knighted him at Whitehall. In 1734 the Benchers of the Temple danced and sang after dinner about the fire, in the middle of the hall, singing the song, "Round about our Coal Fire." Before the Reformation solemn Scotland had her "abbot of misrule;" and Durandus tells us that in France "the bishops and clerks disported in the episcopal palaces, and descended to songs" on Christmas-day.

We listen with pleasure still to the kindly gossip of the good knight Sir Roger prattling of his Christmas doings to the Spectator in Gray's Inn Gardens; but we shall never see again the squire, as in the days of Queen Anne, playing at cards only at Christmas with the family pack produced from the mantelpiece, or round a bowl of steaming punch, garnished with a toast and nutmeg, assemble his tenants before the fire, glowing with huge logs, and then regale them with flagons of ale and stories not so apposite to his cards as that related by Southey to Williams Wynn; but legends of ghosts and witches, so frightful that his credulous audience durst not stir from their two-armed chairs but in a body, when midnight chimed. There is still, however, an old custom preserved at Queen's College, Oxford, which Southey alludes to in his "Joan of Arc," and Dugdale speaks of in his "Origines Juridicæ,"—the ceremony of the "boar's head." In 1170, King Henry II. served the same lordly dish to his son, with trumpets sounding before it. In the fine old college-hall, on Christmas-day, in this present year of grace, the manciple will be seen bearing up the boar's head bedecked with bays and rosemary, and the Taberdar heard chanting the song as ancient as the time of Wynkyn de Worde, until his voice is drowned in the lusty chorus of

Caput Apri defero
Reddens laudes Domino.

Aubrey tells us that the boar's head with the lemon in his mouth was the customary Christmas dish at every gentleman's table up to the period of the Civil Wars, but the gossips of Queen's aver that they celebrate the triumph of an ancient Taberdar who choked a huge boar, upon Hedington Hill, with a whole mouthful of Aristotle, as he was studying the "Rhetoric" of that philosopher. At Stockholm, the sound of sleigh-bells, the grating of the boards on which people are shot down the icehills, and the long snow-shoes and ice-pattens of shaggy-coated skaters make pleasant music to the ears of our Scandinavian cousins.

The Christmas "waits" still occasionally, like

certain Volunteer bands, making night hideous by their noise, are relics of the "Lord Mayor's music" of mediæval times. In the last century the poor Tatler was awakened by the watchman thumping at his door and crying out "Good morrow, Mr. Bickerstaff; good morrow, my masters all;" and by "the bellman's doleful salutation." "Sweet Vinny Bourne" wrote an address for David Cook, "the vigilant and circumspect watchman" of Westminster; and Joseph Warton indited verses for a brother bellman of Oxford.

At Exeter, in 1737, the whiffers, in blue cloaks, and the waits, with hautboys and trumpets, perambulated the streets, and in the morning sang carols to the scraping of fiddles; while the beadles, acting as bellmen, knocked at doors with the brass knobs on the heads of their staves. At Hartlepool the children still sing carols, as they did in Brand's time at Newcastle. The rough boatmen of Brighton call themselves "wassailers" at Christmas, and sing old songs in the halls of private houses and hotels. At Falmouth youths go about singing an old ballad, which will not bear printing, but ends with these lines:

Two of them is blessed babes, and clothed all in green,
And One is one, and all alone, and evermore shall
be so.

Within the last fifty years the boys of Christ's Hospital sang a carol on Christmas morning, beginning "Hail, happy morn!"

In Chester and the adjacent villages similar bands of singers go through the streets, and their numbers and admirers are increased, owing to the fact that in this county agricultural labourers hire themselves out for a stipulated time from New Year's-eve to Christmas-day.

The oldest carol we have is written in Norman French: the most popular, owing to its rolling chorus, is "As Joseph was a-walking."

Walter Scott and Edgar Taylor have made us familiar with the carols of Germany; but few of our great poets have written carols, except Herrick, in his "Star Song," or Milton in the glorious "Hymn to the Nativity." The well-known carol now in use, "Hark! the herald angels sing," was composed by Charles Wesley. At the palace of Greenwich, when King Henry VII. kept Christmas in the palace-hall, the choir of the Chapel Royal sang a carol at the feast; and Bishop Andrews speaks in his sermons of the "carols sung at home" on this day.

In the country villages round Tübingen and Stuttgart the children, on the three Thursdays preceding Christmas-day, go round the villages shooting peas and barleycorns through a reed against the windows. The origin of the custom has been traced to the time of the plague in Suabia, when friends would come into the afflicted town and throw up a handful of peas against the latticed window: if the inmate was alive, he showed himself, and gave a kindly salute.

In the market-place of Calw children go round about with cowbells in their hands, in honour of the manger of Bethlehem. In other places three boys, dressed in white, with leathern girdles and crowns of coloured paper, and having their faces blacked, personate the

three kings who, the sacristan of Cologne says, lie in the sumptuous shrine within its superb minster.

In Ireland, the old custom of singing carols is preserved; and in Wales the Christmas carol is still sung to the harp on Christmas-eve.

In the west country, during the last century, at seven or eight o'clock in the evening, cakes were drawn hot from the oven; cider or beer exhilarated the merry-makers in every house; and carol-singing was prolonged late into the night.

Davies Gilbert says that on Christmas-day "carols took the place of psalms and hymns in all the churches at afternoon service, all the congregation joining; and at the end it was usual for the parish clerk to declare in a loud voice his wishes for a "merry Christmas and a happy new year."

In Aubrey's time, in the churches of the North Riding, the congregation at Christmas danced after the prayers, crying out "Yole! yole! yole!"

In the Isle of Man, the servants having hunted and killed a wren at midnight, brought it into the church, and with mock solemnity sang its "knell" in the Manx language. In the Scilly Isles carols were sung in church as they were in dear Dr. Primrose's primitive parish of Wakefield.

During Christmas-eve, at Exeter, the parish choirs go round the streets singing anthems, with instrumental accompaniments; and on Christmas morning, at a quarter past seven o'clock, the choir assembles in the beautiful minstrel-gallery in the nave-triforium of the cathedral, and chants the fine Old Hundredth Psalm to the full organ. The feeble light, the shadowy aisles, the flickering candles, and crowd of hearers, compose a strange and picturesque scene.

Times have changed since men sang

"'Tis merry in the hall when beards wag all,"

nevermore to return, unless the old days revive with the movement so much abominated by the Bishop of Rochester. The dainty peacock-pies, so gaily decked with waving feathers, the lamb's-wool,—a roasted crab floating in a tankard of spiced ale,—the hacken or sausage, the "lusty brawn," the grim boar's head, the huge bowl of punch, and the black-jacks full of frothing strong ale, have disappeared with the old games celebrated by Wither in his rollicking verses, and quaintly named "gambols of knights and ladies," "post and pair," "trim trenchard," "hodman blind," "shoe the wild mare," "high jinks with dice," "steal the white loaf," "questions and commands," the favourite game in the times of the Stuarts, "the priest hath lost his cloak," "bob apple," and "hot cockles," though a song describing the latter is still vociferously demanded by the gods in the gallery on boxing-night from the clown in the pantomime. "Snapdragon," "blindman's buff," with "kissing through the poker," and "forfeits," are relegated to children, who do not despise such amusements, or the superior charms of charades. Kings no longer keep Christmas in Westminster Hall, in the castle of the favoured provincial town, or some un-

fortunate abbey where the monks grudged their enforced hospitality. The elder wine, spiced ale, and egg-hot are gradually going out of fashion; and the fiddler, with his ancient country tunes, playing a country dance, "join hands and down the middle," or blithe "Sir Roger de Coverley," is a rare sight even in the primitive north. The goose-club, the Prize Cattle Show, and the pantomime have supplanted such delights in the metropolis.

In the Highlands of Scotland, after the sour scones in the bicker have been discussed, the swing, the ball-clubs, and the gun, at "wad-shooting," wile away the day, and the haggis and whiskey toddy the night.

There are only some few old-fashioned folks left who bid each other "a happy Christmas," or conclude their letters with the ancient formula "all the compliments of the season." It is only in the kitchen or servants' hall that the old custom is preserved, of which a Venerable Archdeacon tells us, the bush of mistletoe, with its gleaming white berries, hung up, "with the charm attached to it, that the maid who was not kissed under it at Christmas would not be married in that year."

Dr. Stukeley mentions a strange custom, which he says was "lately preserved at York. On the eve of Christmas-day they carry mistletoe to the high altar of the cathedral, and proclaim a public and universal pardon, liberty, and freedom to all sorts of inferior and even wicked people, at the gates of the city, towards the four quarters of heaven."

Our churches are still decked with evergreens, laurel, bay, ivy, and holly with its glossy leaves and bright scarlet beads; and the preacher "enveloped in greens" gave occasion to a "fast young lady" to write a naughty letter to the "Spectator." In Gay's time rosemary was added, and even forbidden mistletoe when the sexton was thoughtless. In the fourteenth century holly adorned the hall, and ivy was wound round the posts of the door. Very possibly the 13th verse in the 60th chapter of Isaiah suggested the decoration of the churches with the verdant garb of leaves and boughs, as it is appointed as the First Lesson for Christmas-eve.

There is a new feature in children's feasts—new, certainly, within the last twenty years—and equally novel in Denmark, the Christmas-tree, first suggested, perhaps, by Coleridge in a letter from Ratzburgh. And though we have lost some good old customs of the days of the fine old English gentleman, some pleasant scenes survive; there is a cheerful dance in many a household; there are pleasant dinners in the ragged-school, the hospital, the workhouse, the almshouse and the charity school; and the Lord High Almoner, or his deputy, distributes the Royal maundy at Windsor and Whitehall. The railways bring up huge country hampers, joyous gatherings assemble round the board in the old home, and still Christmas may, as in the ancient pageants, be personified as "an old man hung round with savoury dainties," although he no longer "dances round the maypole or rides the hobby-horse." MACKENZIE E. C. WALCOTT.